

# THE MIDLAND

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## THE WAYS OF HIS FATHERS

By WALTER J. MUILENBURG

As the plains of the great Mississippi Valley strike northward, they become a dead level, relieved only by the rippling sheets of water that collect on their monotonous expanse. Farther north, these plains, still level, but with outcroppings of rock, become covered with pine timber until, not far from the international border, civilization tapers, and only the gloom of an endless vista of forest stretches out to the horizon. Square mile after square mile is untenanted except for the stealthy animals that find protection in this solitude. By chance, the traveler may emerge out of the dark forest into a small, hidden clearing possessing, perhaps, a half dozen shanties, built of rudely-trimmed logs. These are the homes of farmers, each managing to have a long, log stable and a pasture raggedly bound by the old-fashioned rail fence. Though the soil is shallow, a light humus of woodland moss decaying for long ages in the musty dimness of forest shade, these people are able to live, simply, and in the peace of nature, far from the fever of our alert age.

On the edge of one such clearing in this region, Ollie Knudsen swung his ax into a dense growth of sapling pine with the long, powerful sweep of the born woodsman. Stroke followed stroke in precise rhythm; a flash

of sunlight reflected from the iron, and another small tree quivered and toppled to the ground. Then, as though tired, he struck his ax deep into a nearby stump and leaned against the handle in an attitude of careless relaxation. He pushed back the shapeless fur cap and mopped his forehead with a large blue handkerchief.

Seen so, against the dark green of scrub pine, he appeared more massive than he really was, though he was somewhat over six feet tall, and his lithe body intimated an enviable strength. His feet were encased in high leather boots, that sank an inch into the spongy, oozing ground. The ends of his heavy corduroy trousers were tucked into the tops of these boots, keeping out the wind which came from the northwest in a steady, cold sweep. The short jacket, lined with sheepskin, swung on the broken branch of a pine, and his gray flannel shirt, open at the throat, hinted by the sight of muscles tapering there of the reserve strength in the man. But the face, with its frankness, its pleasant blue eyes, and the heavy mop of tawny hair that brushed over the forehead showed, not the man, but the boy, probably a boy of nineteen, an age when youth and manhood seem to merge.

For a quarter of an hour, Ollie stood there, leaning against his ax, staring out towards the west, where the sun was already dipping in its final lap toward night. Far away, seen in the waning light of day, the endless stretch of forest became one heavy blot of darkness. Nearer at hand, the trees stood out sharp and black against the sun, thousands of straight masts that had been denuded of their branches years before when a forest fire had raged through this region and left only these dead, rigid memorials of a past beauty. Under these trees, patches of snow lay dimly white in the gathering dusk.

The scene was old to Ollie Knudsen, but still it held him with a fascination which, because he could not understand its charm, made his eyes wistful. He breathed

deeply of the air, clear and sharp, touched with that intangible odor of pine that comes with the first day of thaw, and it seemed to him as though he were breathing the rare beauty of it into his body. Then his eyes left the distant places and lowered to the little clearing before him, about half a mile in diameter, where the scattered log shacks were almost lost in the shadows of the evening. Thin spirals of smoke, invisible until they rose above the line of timber against the sky, seemed like a thin fog in the ruddy sunset light. The fragrance of this wood smoke stirred up thoughts of supper; withdrawing the blade of his ax from the rotten stump, he threw his coat over his shoulder and strode down the slight slope towards the nearest shack, whose windows were still black and unlighted.

The firelight from the stove where the meal was being prepared lightened the gloom of the room with flickering shadows. The boy threw his coat into a corner and, while he was loosening the laces of his boots, his mother carried a burning splinter of wood from the stove and lit the hanging lamp. The light revealed a small room which contained both the dining table and the cook stove; in a corner a rough stairway led up into the loft.

Ollie lay sprawled out at ease in his chair, his feet propped comfortably against the reservoir of the stove. There was a noise outside, and a large, heavy-set man entered with a pail half-filled with milk. This he poured into a pan and then, after he had removed his outer wraps, they all drew up to the table, maintaining an absolute silence.

The father and son helped themselves time after time from the heaped platter of smoking hot fried pork, and dipped their bread into the fat. They consumed their food like men who need it to maintain their vitality after a long day's toil. The woman, small in stature beside the other two, poured the coffee from the granite coffee pot and rose once in a while to replenish empty plates. Then,

as the members of her hungry family sat back in repletion, their tongues were loosed.

"Get pretty well into the brush?" asked the man.

"I got a start," replied the boy briefly.

"Just take it easy," the woman's softer voice broke in. "You mustn't work too hard. Pa got a crick in his back when he was about as old as you — just from goin' it too hard with the work."

The boy laughed and stretched his arms behind his head, tensing and relaxing comfortably.

"No chance I'll work too hard, Ma. I'm kind o' lazy."

His eyes took on the wistful expression of the afternoon. His mother noted it. "What's the matter?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh, nothin'," the boy replied half-diffidently. "Only I got to thinkin' this afternoon that I'd like to get out o' here for awhile — get to see somethin' o' things once."

His father laughed. "Touch o' spring fever in your blood. Ma better get you some sassafras."

The woman did not smile, but her face held an expression of perplexity. "Go away!" she repeated. "Where's there to go?"

"Oh — just away from here — see things." Ollie rose, drew on his jacket, tightened the laces of his boots, and pulled the cap over his ears. "Guess I'll go to the store awhile," he said. "Maybe some o' the boys will be around."

"They say that Johnson's got a talkin' machine over to his store," his father remarked. "If I wasn't so sleepy, I'd go along and see how one o' them things works."

Outside, the air was keen with the penetrating chill of late winter. Ollie walked rapidly down the road, almost indistinguishable in the darkness. Ahead, a yellow light streamed out of one of the shacks. Toward this point of light Ollie went.

As soon as he entered the store, Ollie was aware that

this was somewhat of an occasion. He was welcomed by a burst of music from a small phonograph with a big protruding horn. He would have walked toward it, were it not that a group of girls were talking and laughing in the front of the store, choosing new selections to place upon the machine. He passed them with an averted gaze, until he saw Bessie Anderson on the outskirts of the group. Se looked up at him and smiled. He smiled in response, and felt pleased, but reddened at the sound of subdued giggles behind him. He knew what they thought. It was none of their business. Bessie, with her shiny, neatly-braided hair, looked nicer than the rest of them, and didn't giggle so much. He was glad that she was his girl.

At the rear of the store, about a roaring stove, a knot of older men had gathered, talking spasmodically, or listening to the music from the talking machine. Ollie joined these unobtrusively, seating himself on the edge of a pyramid of herring kegs.

The boy could not listen to the talk of the men, but his eyes strayed continually to the front of the store, toward the group of girls. Whenever one glanced around, he quickly fixed his eyes in a lack-lustre stare at the window beyond, which was beginning to frost at the bottom. Then other young men of his age began to come in. They all remained with the girls and Ollie listened to their laughter and banter. Why couldn't he be with them? If it were not for his embarrassment, he know that he could talk as well, and better, than any of the others. Girls made him speechless. Of course, there was Bessie — she had always been a kind of comrade to him, and he felt easy enough when he was alone with her.

One of the fellows, a big, raw-boned frontiersman, was talking to Bessie, laughing uncouthly at his own witticisms. His small, washed-out blue eyes disgusted the watchful Ollie and, in sudden anger, he walked toward the group.

As he came up, the witty fellow turned and saw him. "Ollie saw me talkin' with his girl, an' he couldn't stand it!" he roared, his heavy face working in merriment. At the repulsive leer on the speaker's face, Ollie felt the blood beating against his ear drums.

"Oh, I guess that's about enough, George," he said slowly. "Just let it go at that."

There had been a general laugh at George's speech, but a dead silence followed Ollie's words, for his tone had an ugly quietness that might mean a fight in this community where men were primitive to a degree.

George backed away. "It's all right, Ollie — don't get mad." He tried to smooth the matter with a silly grin.

This altercation had drawn the attention of all those in the store. Just then, Bessie glanced demurely at Ollie. In the revulsion of feeling that had come over him, he felt that she was simpering at him for the benefit of the crowd.

A silence had fallen over the entire group; the boys stood about, lumpishly awkward at the knowledge that the situation was strained. Bessie, most tactful of all, placed a record upon the revolving disc and in a moment a song in the clear, lilting voice of a girl, swelled out over the small room.

Ollie was so absorbed in his unpleasant thoughts that he did not, at first, hear the music. The unpleasantness seemed to vapor out of his brain, and a sensation of ease grew upon him. Then, with a slow dawning, the spell of the song crept into his mind, a throbbing, rich experience of joy that he had longed for incoherently. He saw the singer: she was clad in a thin, white garment that clung to her, hinting at her youth and sparkling beauty. He was intoxicated with his dream of the hidden singer, and the tense desire to form a radiant image of her in his soul made him unconscious of his surroundings. He did not see the dingy shelves, almost hidden in the yellow light of the oil lamps, a light made more dim by a gray

mist of tobacco smoke. He saw only one person, a lithe, dancing girl, a girl who could transform his world into fairyland, a girl who, through the charm of her song, was calling to him. Then the song died into silence. A blankness as of darkness fell like a weight upon his soaring mind.

"Nine o'clock!" cried one of the girls, with a sidelong glance toward a strapping young man who was leaning against the tobacco counter, and whose lower jaw sagged catarrhally. "We got to be goin' home."

There followed a bustle and whispering, as various young men offered their escort. The older men at the rear had risen to view this ceremony. Ollie stood somewhat back from the others and, sharply aware that Bessie had turned to look at him, remained where he was. Then they trooped out of the door. Bessie was the last to leave; as she stood in the doorway, Ollie once more met her eyes, and a flush mantled his cheeks at the frank, beseeching look she gave him. Just for a moment he thought to go with her and then, stubbornly, he held back. To go would be to him as though he had given away this glory of realization that had come just a few moments before in the song. The door closed. Half-dazedly, he picked up the record and replaced it in the machine, and again fell an instant victim to its charm.

This rudely-dressed young man whose years had all been spent in hard, physical labor, a life unenlightened by the little, softening graces that make of existence something more than an unending round of labor, had awaited his Romance, his Adventure, so long that now, when the dream had taken form, it seemed the one rare blossom of his life. It was his! As the laughing, dancing music wove its phantasm into his thoughts, he felt as though he could have stretched forth his hand, and she would come to him. His eyes were wide, and a wistful smile touched his face. The music ceased and once more he played it, and then again.

"What's the matter, Ollie? You ain't gone and got crazy about the girl in the talkin' machine, huh?" Ollie, suddenly brought to earth, saw that the men about the stove were laughing at him. In confusion, he stopped the machine.

"Poor Bessie — she went home alone, I bet!" ventured a facetious graybeard.

The boy pulled his fur cap over his ears and left the store. The night had turned clear and cold, and to Ollie, who had almost come to man's estate, the world of night seemed bathed with a warm color that ebbed and flowed about a lithe figure of a girl who was smaller than he, and frail, but who was always at his side, singing. He strode rapidly down the narrow path, invisible in the darkness, his face uplifted to the sky where the myriad of stars gleamed in the black mantle of night.

Arrived at the dark log shack, Ollie quietly pulled off his boots and placed them beside the stove so that they might be warm and dry in the morning. Then, as quietly, so as not to awaken his mother who slept lightly, he was about to ascend the ladder to his room when he heard his name called. He opened the door to the room where his parents slept.

"I just wanted to know it was you, Ollie," his mother explained, and then, as he turned, "I guess you didn't go home alone, did you?" The woman laughed quietly, contentedly.

This was an invariable formula, and an invariable pleasantry. The boy did not reply, but laughed in an embarrassed manner. "Good night," he said abruptly, and ascended to the cold, black loft where he had to walk in a crouching position so as not to strike the sloping roof.

On other nights, not sixty seconds would elapse before his senses were immersed in deep slumber, but tonight the delights of sleep had become cheap beside the vibrating, poignant emotion that surged within him. His

brain was clarified and pictures raced through his mind, amazingly credible. He saw her on a great stage, a fairy in a setting of golden color. As she sang, with face uplifted, she suddenly sensed his presence in the audience, — her eyes met his, and she smiled at him. Afterward —

So he lay for a long time, tense, with his head pillowed in his arms. Before he slept, however, he remembered the eager gladness in his mother's voice because she thought that he had gone home with Bessie Peterson, and he thought of Bessie too, and of that one look she had given him in the doorway of the store.

At noon, the next day, Ollie returned home from work to find his mother unwontedly silent. He knew that some neighbor had told about that incident of the preceding evening when he had allowed Bessie to go home alone. He would have liked to talk, but found nothing to say. At the table, he saw that his mother poured a spoonful of sugar into his coffee, and took less for herself. The best morsel on each plate was his, and he accepted this silently, for it had always been so; but now, he wished that she wouldn't do these things. She did not accuse him by word or look; rather, she avoided his eyes. These little things happened each day, but at other times she wasn't so quiet.

After they had eaten, they pushed back their chairs noisily on the uncarpeted floor and, while the woman cleared the table, both the man and the boy filled their pipes with tobacco from a pail hanging on the wall. Chairs tilted back, they drew at their pipes in silence, the smoke flowing smoothly toward the open door where it became blue in the yellow spring sunshine. Twice the man took the pipe from his mouth and cleared his throat, as though he were about to say something, and each time he seemed to change his mind, and stared, unseeing, at a sliver of light on the opposite wall, where the chinking had fallen away from the logs. Then, knocking the ashes from his pipe to the floor, he turned casually to the boy.

"Well, did y' get over your spring fever, or are you still thinkin' o' goin' away, like you said last night?"

"I guess it ain't the spring fever," replied the boy, almost sullenly. "I ain't got a chance here. People don't get anywhere by stayin' here — they have a few cows, raise some grain — and it's always the same thing over again. There ain't no shows, no excitement —" He finished, as though helpless to express what he had to say. He dared not tell them that he wanted to go away because of a song he had heard.

"I remember when we first come here, Ma and me," the man started abruptly, after a moment, "We thought we'd make a lot o' money. The ground didn't look so good, but we thought the timber was goin' to sell high some time. Then the fire came, and it looked like everything was gone. But we ain't made out so bad; we're pretty well off, in our way. What's more, we made a mistake: it ain't the trees that's worth so much here, it's the stuff under the ground!" His voice had been low and calm; now it rose and he spoke as though facing an audience, his eyes fired with enthusiasm. "Why, boy, do you know there's enough iron under our land to make us rich? Rich — I'm tellin' you! O' course, the country ain't opened up yet. I just happened to tell Ma this morning that if you stayed here, you'd be mighty well off some day — ain't that so, Ma?"

The boy had seen his mother stop work to listen to her husband's words, and his throat had tightened at the eager brightness in her eyes. In response to the question, she nodded, almost breathlessly.

"Now don't think I'm tryin' to keep you home," resumed the man quietly, "Only, I know that this country will open up, and the folks that stay are goin' to make out big. It don't make much difference to Ma and me, we're both goin' on to sixty-five, and we don't want money specially. You maybe can make out better somewhere else — an' you can go, if you want. O' course, it'll

be kind o' lonesome — Ma an' me — nobody around —” his words became uncertain and he stopped. The boy stared at the floor without saying a word, conscious that his mother still stood in the middle of the room, looking at him, and that his father, who was ostensibly refilling his pipe, was also watching him out of the corners of his eyes. Then, like a pain, the lure of the song and singer swept over him. His face flushed, and his hands gripped the edge of the chair. He got up and threw his coat over his shoulder.

“About time for me to be gettin’ to work,” he said, noncommittally, without looking at them.

“Oh, Ollie —” his mother’s voice came to him as he walked away, “You’d better come home early; I’m going to have pie — cream pie — for supper.”

He did not turn toward her, and walked faster. They were trying to buy him to stay at home, even making cream pie, because he happened to like it. Then a horror came over him. What should he do? He couldn’t go away — his mother and father were too old to get along. But he couldn’t give up all his life! As though to break away from these thoughts, he walked faster.

The afternoon’s work had little flavor to it. In the morning, the brilliance of a warm sun in a blue sky had been caught up in his mood and he had been conscious while he worked that at last something definite, something great, was in store for him.

Since dawn, the day had grown steadily warmer, and the scattered patches of snow had disappeared at noon. Before the afternoon had well begun, there was the thin, tinkling sound of running water; the soft, mossy ground was overflowing with its burden of moisture. But the clearness in the air had changed, imperceptibly, to a pale haze that made the sky a colorless white. The boy took up his work listlessly. Ever and anon, his mind caught at a fragment of the music he had heard the night before, and then a host of living images swept over him, only to

bring back, at last, a picture of his mother, and Bessie. After this, almost violently, he decided not to think about anything at all — only to pursue the same circle of thought again.

The shadow of the sun crept slowly eastward. When the time came for him to stop work, the boy, instead of going home, sat down on a stump, took out his knife, and started to whittle a stick.

The sun, big and red on the far horizon, sent its last light dimly over the desolate land, gloomy and black with its age-old covering of towering pine masts. Ollie looked out into the distance, where the red of the sunset suffused a strange enchantment over the darkness of the forest, and a smouldering light lay deep in his eyes. What lay out there — far beyond the edge of the forest, beyond the burning line of sunset? His pulse leaped at the Adventure that would meet him if he were to go away. The world lay at his feet and, like a thin strand of light woven into the web of his inner consciousness, he heard the inviting laughter of a lithe, clear-eyed girl. He had but to stretch forth his hand, it seemed to him, in a sudden, sweeping sense of power, and all this would be his. Inevitably, as the mood swept itself, he remembered the face of Bessie and her two braids of yellow hair. He would think about it no longer. He rose, swung the ax to his shoulder, and made for home.

The sun had partially dipped below the horizon, and all the sky was gray except for a narrow edge of crimson in the west. Far away, the red of the sunset was reflected in a lake, like a fateful tinge of blood in the darkness. The sound of dripping water was constant in his ears; under his heavy shoes, sinking deep into the mould, water oozed as from a sponge; all the earth was sodden with moisture, rotten with it. Ollie turned in toward the house.

An unwonted embarrassment touched them all at the supper table, and the silence lasted throughout the meal.

The boy saw both his father and his mother glance at him, and knew that they blamed themselves for this situation.

Afterwards, without a word to them, he slipped out of the door, and strode to the store. Here he found the same group of boys and girls as on the preceding evening, playing the phonograph, talking and laughing about the same little matters that had always entertained them, and would always entertain them.

Ollie slipped to one side, and stared at them. He saw Bessie, and she spoke to him as always, without anger or restraint, quite as though nothing had come between them. For a moment, he felt a pride in her. She was so different from the others, more quiet and self-contained. They stood near one another, but found nothing to say. Their companions, too engrossed in their pleasure, took little heed of the silent figures near them.

The music ceased, and Ollie saw that Bessie was placing another record on the machine. Before the music recommenced, she turned full toward him and met his eyes squarely. He stared at her, but could not fathom the incomprehensible steadiness in her face. Then, as the record began to revolve, Ollie was lost in a rush of music. It was the song that had so stirred him all day. It seemed to take his breath; but his face showed less eagerness now — only an intense absorption, a deep, still attention.

One of the group, Lulu Johnson, the girl who always gave the signal when it was nine o'clock and time to go home, manipulated the phonograph now. She had evidently noticed Ollie's tense posture.

"Shall I play it again, Ollie?" she cried, slyly glancing at Bessie.

"No," replied the boy quietly, "I don't care to hear it any more."

"You're too bashful!" cried his tormentor. "Wait, I'll find out her name. Here it is —" she pronounced the name haltingly, "Narcissa — I can't quite make out her

last name, it sounds kind o' dago-like. I bet she is nice and brown, and jabbers funny, like the gypsies I seen once down state. But she has the most beautiful black hair and eyes — you like dark girls better than light ones, don't you, Ollie?" Again the girl threw a sidelong glance at Bessie.

The inference was so apparent that Ollie's face whitened under its tan. Had it been one of the boys, he could have stopped the mischief-maker, but he couldn't stem the torrent of the girl's senseless venom. He dared not look at Bessie. If only Lulu would stop — but she continued, searching meanwhile among the records, "If you'll just hold yourself quiet for a minute, I'll try to find another record where Narcissy sings — Oh! here's one, and got a fine name to it, too — singing and dancing."

The record commenced with a crash, followed by a woman's voice singing a ribald, sentimental song. For a moment Ollie felt that this was not his singer, for this was sordid, with no least trace of beauty. He even smiled a little to himself at the impossibility of it all. It was simply the girl's idea of a joke to make him believe that these two singers were one and the same. Then, suddenly, came a tender, catching refrain, though the words were cheap, — and then the boy knew that this was, after all, his singer. The veil of beauty had been rent in twain, disclosing his idol as something unutterably tawdry and debased. He turned his face aside, instinctively afraid that the others might read his shame. Oh! if only the record would stop! The high cracked voice, in spite of its violent sprightliness, reminded him of darkness, of hopelessness, faithless defeat. His face was tired and sick.

The small audience applauded the selection vigorously and demanded that it be played once more; but Lulu Johnson, who had caught a glimpse of the boy's strained expression, quietly placed another record on the disc.

To the big, strong boy who stood back from the rest of

his fellows, it seemed as though hours passed, while song after song issued from the metallic throat of the machine, music meaningless, with no message for him. The talk and laughter, too, was dim and meaningless, like weird unrealities born of this murky, yellow atmosphere. His face was sombre still, but the eyes were calm and steady. He stood there, in an attitude of waiting.

"Nine o'clock! Time to be goin' home," cried Lulu Johnson. There was a bustle, a subdued tumult, as the boys and girls paired off and disappeared into the darkness.

When most of them were gone, Ollie stepped to Bessie's side.

"Bessie," he said humbly, "may I take you home to-night?"

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## THE SINGER

By GEORGE CARVER

### I

Felicity lay impassive in the white fetters of February.

Snow upon snow had fallen from a sky at first relentless, implacable in its fury to manacle the village, but now remote, indifferent, as if having gained its ends, it had withdrawn in sullen aloofness.

Only, occasionally it remembered to tighten the bonds and sent wind after wind across the ridges of the world to toss aloft great swirls of white like clouds of dust in summer, or to move them decorously, in state, like tall ghosts behind a funeral, and then drop them in barrier drifts.

Icicles depended from eave-troughs like long, inverted cones.

Birds huddled together shapeless against the chimneys.

Treacherous crusts formed over the drifts.

Wagon wheels creaked.

Sleigh-bells clinked faintly, as if cushioned in the wind.

And the cold crept in. Through cracks it came and through crevices, through keyholes, down chimneys, in at windows, under doors, until the handful of human beings who had been born here, to suffer a brief space and die, realizing the futility of struggling against it, gave up and sat stolidly over their fires.

Year by year it came, the cold. And after the first few weeks of path making, of sweeping the snow tracks from their floors, of floundering through the drifts in an effort to keep the life stream of the village in flow, the people retired in defeat to long dully for spring, going out only for food, water, fuel, the barest necessities of life.

And year by year it went. With the passing of the snow, with the re-birth of the river, the awakening of the fields, the smell of the refreshed earth, life in the village revived. Joyously the people took up again the business of living — plowing, sowing, reaping, buying, selling, meeting, parting, giving birth, and taking death.

But never for long. Over them brooded always the spectre of winter so soon to stalk abroad in their midst, binding them helplessly to their firesides in chains of dulness, and stifling within them every impulse but that of hope. And hope they had always with them, impelling some finally to tear asunder the ties that bound them to the region, and stirring others to vague yearnings, faint dreamings, thin desires.

## II

A woman dragged herself through the drifts that smothered Market Street. She was wrapped in a long, much worn, mouse colored cloak and muffled to the eyes in a dingy tippet of gray and black. The skirt of the cloak, upon which hung clots of snow, as if she had frequently fallen, rested awkwardly on the surface each time she stepped — mid-leg deep in the drifts. She bent slightly forward, head drawn down, shoulders hunched high, fighting the wind.

In the middle of the block stood the post-office, between Kennedy's Drug Store, on one side, with its window display of Wilson's Insecticide — left over from the August demand — barely visible through the frost caked glass, and South's Meat Market, on the other, the two steps to which had been swept clean of snow and sprinkled with saw-dust. The post-office steps, however, each showed two foot-impressions, like the inside of great empty boots. Upon reaching this point the woman turned to enter; she placed her feet carefully in the deep tracks and pulled herself wearily up by holding to the brass door-latch.

Inside, she paused for a moment and spread out her hands to the heat of the huge round-bellied stove in the middle of the floor; then she made straight for the square window in the block of glass covered pigeon-holes that served for mail boxes.

Upon seeing her, old Billy Prather, the post-master, whose past forty years had been spent behind the pigeon-holes at the rear of the room when the Republican party was in power, and behind the candy counter along the right wall when it was not, who was near-sighted from much reading of letter addresses in dim light and wrinkled into kindly lines from much selling of penny candy to children, — old Billy Prather stopped his work of distributing among the boxes the handful of evening mail he held, and reached for the general delivery packet. This he thumbed through twice, peering steadily at each envelope and mumbling the name to himself. Finally he put the packet down and without looking at the woman said, "Nothing to-day, Ellen." And his voice was very gentle.

Outside once more, the woman resumed her struggle. Down Market Street she buffeted her way as far as the school-yard. Here she hesitated before turning the corner on to Stringtown Pike, in order to take advantage of what shelter was offered by the close-set trees looming gray and stark in the winter dusk; for, denuded as they

were, they formed the last vestige of protection against the wind which she knew would claw at her like a wild thing as soon as she rounded the corner.

Then, wrapping her cloak more closely about her, she came fairly out upon the Pike and into the clutches of the wind. As best she could she followed a freshly cut sleigh-track. The wind attacked her in slashing onrushes, whipping back her heavy garments as though they were no more than the sheerest gossamer and outlining almost as if naked her meagre form, the fallen breasts, narrow hips, swollen knees. On she went, however, staggering, recovering, plunging knee-deep into the drifts by the roadside, struggling back again to the sleigh rut, falling twice in rapid succession, getting up and wiping the snow from her face, gasping for breath, crying from exhaustion. At a bend in the road, where the Pike made a sudden right angle south, stood a large sign board. Sheltered behind this she was able to collect the remaining ounces of her strength and so cover the last hundred yards of her journey. With the wind lashing at her in all its viciousness from the side, nevertheless she made easier progress and won finally to her own gate.

The house crouched somewhat back from the Pike behind a row of frowning spruces, the branches of which sagged wearily under their burden of snow. It was small, and gabled front and back. The porch buckled, one shutter on each of the two front windows hung by only the bottom hinge, the roof drooped, and the paint clung dismally to the up and down weather-boarding in tiny gray flakes. She tottered up to the door through new-blown drifts, her path of the morning having been entirely obliterated, and into the house.

The air in the room was curdled, smelling stale and oppressive, no ventilation having been possible during the day. She felt her way with long accustomed touch to the kitchen, and unwinding her thick clothing, threw it aside and lighted first the kerosene lamp in a bracket by the rear window and then the oil stove opposite the sink.

With seemingly no thought of rest she busied herself about preparing her supper. As she stepped from the food-safe, of walnut and tin, the doors perforated in star shaped designs, to the table, covered with yellow and brown oilcloth, and then to the stove, weird shadows pursued her gaunt figure, flickering now on one wall, now on the well scrubbed wide planked floor, and now on the newspaper protecting the wall behind the stove. Finally she placed at the table a chair with a seat made of binder twine, and sat down to her meal.

Her hand, as she poured the tea, shook from exhaustion, her thin shoulders bent angularly over her plate, her dulled eyes stared vacantly at the food, her whole body seemed to slump.

In ten minutes she had finished eating, and in fifteen more, having washed up her few dishes and put the kitchen to rights, that last making necessary putting on the heavy cloak again for a trip to the cistern outside, she was in bed, sinking into the troubled sleep that was to prepare her for the gruelling of another day.

Outside, the wind snapped and snarled around the house and over the roof, shaking violently at the loose weather-boarding and wrenching at the hanging shutters, as if having been thwarted in its effort to destroy the woman before, it was trying anew to gain entrance and carry out its will. From across the river floated the bark of a dog, faint, then loud, faint, then loud, as though he were being throttled and released, then throttled and released again by the wind.

### III

What is it that in age lures on to living? The glow within the thurible is quenched, but still the incense rises, calling on sinners to repent, until, faint and feeble, it fades, it passes, and is gone.

So Ellen Martin. Moiled by life into lonely old age, worn down to the mere acceptance of tomorrow by the harsh usage of experience, she lingered as woman of all

work in Felicity, thankful that the pittance she gained thus sufficed to keep her alive.

Like the thurible, however, she once had glowed, once had added by her youth, her freshness, something of a fragrance to the grim world about her.

When she was four years old, her delicate pink, white, and gold prettiness always lighted the eyes of tired women to smiles and tempted the men to buy gum drops. Her mother was poor, so poor that on Hallow E'en when the village boys threw cabbages at doors to frighten people, instead of being frightened she lay in wait for them and gave chase so that they would return and throw more. She often got by this means enough to provide Ellen and herself with cabbage-soup for weeks. Indeed, there was little of beauty about Ellen's childhood; nobody had any time for beauty. And yet all her early impulses tended toward it. Sometimes her mother took her when she went out to work by the day, and while Ellen always played happily with whatever was given her, stringing buttons, cutting paper designs, sewing bright silk pieces, it was the flowers, however, in the yards, whenever there were any in bloom, that drew her inevitably, throwing her into an ecstasy by their beauty.

Once Mrs. Prather, mother of old Billy, the present post-master, who during her lifetime cultivated her garden more carefully than did any other woman in Felicity and who was in the habit of giving very few flowers away, — once she gave Ellen an hydrangea. The child started home all aquiver with delight. In a few minutes, however, she came back and laid it down beneath the bush.

"What's the matter, Ellen; don't you like the flower?" Mrs. Prather asked.

"Oh, yes, but Jack Frost will soon be here to paint the others. Maybe he'll miss this one and be sad; I guess I better put it back."

Swift years saw her unfold into a full blown woman, eager for the life that was to be hers, but timorous,

touched by confused longings, obscure apprehensions, nebulous fears. She took her place in the village alongside her mother, cleaning the houses of other women, washing their clothes, starching their linen, ironing their ruffles, cooking their food, taking care of their children, and in time she became an excellent worker — but her heart was not in her tasks.

Perhaps it was from her father that she got her restlessness. She had never seen him, and her mother never mentioned his name. Her only ideas regarding him came through an incident that happened when she was fourteen. She and her mother were giving their own house its fall cleaning, and she found, wrapped up in an old silk comforter, what she took to be a hat — it was shaped like one except that it had no crown. Inadvertently she put her finger on the label in what should have been the top, and the hat immediately sprang into form. She rushed, filled with questions, to her mother, for as long as she could remember there had never been a man in the house and she had never seen such a hat except in pictures. "Your father's," had been the mother's laconic answer, her lips drawing into a hard, straight line that forbade further questioning.

Although every day was filled to the brim with housework, the evenings were always her own. Sometimes groups of her friends, boys and girls of the village and from the surrounding farms, arranged picnics by the river; or in winter, before the cold became too intense, they went sleighing and skating. And Ellen was generally one of the party, whatever it was. She failed, however, to obtain from these associations the satisfaction she craved. The patterns in her brain made easy conceptions impossible for her companions, and had built up within her a world in which they had no part.

In the beginning it had been the hat that disturbed her, raising before her consciousness dim, formless images of men busy about many inventions, of the com-

ings and goings of lovely, idle women, of the ebb and surge of great crowds, and she would lose herself in a labyrinth of imaginings concerning her father's being a man of enormous wealth who would one day come to carry her away and establish her in the world whence he came. But with the passing of years that brought no word of him, he gradually assumed symbolic significance, and she thought of him not as of her father, but as of the world beyond the village, that promised all that was beautiful, all that was worth while in life. Of her own existence she grew intolerant, even rebellious, straining at the limits imposed upon her by the necessity of helping her mother, who was becoming less and less able to work with her accustomed energy, and by the narrowness of the town.

Of a slow summer evening deep in August, not long before her nineteenth birthday, she joined a party going picnicking by the river. Harvey Dinsmore, son of a rich sheep farmer who lived some six miles out of Felicity on the Chilo road, had invited her to go with him. Dinsmore was a stolid, ox-like young male, but looked upon by Felicity girls as something of a catch because of his father's means. And so for Ellen to be chosen by him was remarked upon, especially as he had never asked her before, having usually chosen Jennie Brannock, a slim, pretty brunette, but one whose eyes sometimes glittered with the hardness of ice.

After the picnic supper was eaten, couples detached themselves from the group and wandered off along the river bank or into the wood nearer town. Ellen allowed Dinsmore to lead her along the bank until they were far out of sight and hearing of the others. Little was said by either; Ellen, lulled by the scented dusk and the sleepy chirps of robins, was content to walk in silence, and Dinsmore had nothing to say. Suddenly Ellen caught a glimpse of the Pleiades through a break in the tree-tops overarching the path and stopped, head thrown back, to

look at the stars; at the same instant she felt herself seized in Dinsmore's thick arms and his hot mouth pressed violently against her lips, and she sensed he would bend her backwards to the ground. A sickening rage confused her for the fraction of a second; then reason cleared and she struck him full in the face with her fist, as hard as her position would allow, and struggled free. It was her first experience with sex and coming as it did brought only loathing; she felt sick almost to vomiting. For a moment after shaking herself free she stood completely still, glaring at Dinsmore with all the hatred of an outraged vestal. He remained speechless before her wrath, crouching a trifle as if he expected a further attack on her part. One word, "Calf!" she spat at him, a sputum of fear, rage, contempt, and fled headlong back toward the picnickers.

A step or two before she came upon the party she managed to compose herself somewhat, realizing that to approach in any way distraught would have been to provoke question, and she did not want that. She was not to escape entirely, however, for soon as she appeared at the edge of the little clearing, she heard the high twang of Jennie Brannock's call to her, "Where's Harvey, Ellen?"

She replied, "He's coming in a minute. Stopped to get a drink at the spring. I have to hurry home. Good night. It was a nice picnic." And she continued her way up the river toward the village; not, however, without overhearing Jennie Brannock's voice again, raised for her benefit, she was sure.

"I wondered why Harvey asked her," she said; "I bet he kissed her."

Ellen came presently to a slight depression in the ground, a tiny ravine hidden from the path but opening toward the river. It was screened by a growth of old willows, several of which knelt out over the stream. She sat down here and gave herself up to a spasm of ungovernable weeping.

It passed, however, into a torrent of rebellion against the limits within which she must have her being. Was love no more than the thing she had just seen? Did it consist merely of violence? All she had known about it led somehow to what was ugliest in living — yet she knew it should not be so. Had not her father loved her mother, and she not loved him; otherwise why the silk hat? But had any spark of happiness arisen for anybody; was she happy, was her mother happy, her father? Had it been love that caused Ben Whitcomb and Laura Trumble to run away to Bethel and get married after Laura's father had come upon them laced in one another's arms in the hammock? If it was, why had Ben beat her and why had he run away when the second baby was born? Why had Harvey Dinsmore treated her as he did? Was it because he wanted to marry her? Was love only embracings and kissings? Was there nothing else?

She recalled some of the girls who had married. Two years and one scarcely knew them. They worked in the fields, they cooked for harvesters, they slaved at the task of holding a home together that a husband might acquire more land, a larger bank account, more power among his friends. But what of the woman? Was love, if not violence, then merely hard work, with no end in sight? Years mounted; strength waned — was life no more than waiting for death? Was there nothing else?

Her thoughts ran away with her. She knew that her life was more than this. Images flowered in her brain; she pictured her mating, the man, the house, the garden, the beautiful clothes, the pleasant friends, the music. No farm for her, no shop in Felicity; the man she married would take her away to the cities whence, she was sure, her father had come.

She began to hope that it would come soon, anything that would break the bonds restraining her, the bonds of here the river, there the village streets, the gossips, the loutish men, the vapid women; and the whole became a

jumble in her mind. Then the strain under which she had labored, coupled with the riot of her thoughts, produced in her a state bordering upon the unconscious, a trance-like mood out of which arose a vision. It seemed vague at first and misty, veiled as if seen through distance, like high summits before the dawn; but soon it grew distinct, completely focused, and she put it in words, uttering them to herself in a kind of chant:

"There is a singer in the soul. He has sung on for ages unending, and for ages to come he will sing. With the wand of his music he touches all sorts and conditions of men, and they awake to live, to feel in their fullness the weavings, the windings of life. At his first low tones young men, young maidens, listening, join hands and lips and are lost in a maze of new longing. Old men, old women hear, and over them steals understanding of all that life meant in its springtime. Little children stand spellbound, then thrill in the arms of young mothers. For all, for each of us, sometime, has sounded his exquisite singing; it mingles the rush of winds, the murmur of forests, the stream of many waters. Men, heeding, rise to the peaks of endeavor, soar far above kings of earth to roam through the halls of David. For the name of the Singer is Hope, and his music the Leaven of Living."

She went home happy, carrying the vision in her heart as a kind of profession of faith upon which she came, finally, to rest her whole conception of living. Her days became brighter; the feeling that her present condition was soon to give way before one infinitely better grew apace, and she fell into musings, wondering when the change would take place and what it would be.

She lived two more restless, impatient years; then Jim Martin came and straightway she adored him. He was an itinerant peddler, one whose route was never a thing of permanence; he travelled southward in autumn and northward in spring selling tinware and notions to housewives. His stories of travel, of the cities he had seen,

the people he had met, the freedom of his life, all captivated Ellen; moreover, his stringy yellow hair, his soft blue eyes with their humorous light, his tall, rangy body, seemed to her all that was beautiful in a man. She paid no attention to the facts, for instance, that his eyes were too close together and that their humorous light sometimes faded before a steely glint; that his fingers were very long and thin, with nails bent like claws; that the ribbon he sold was almost wholly cotton, the pans imperfect; or that his manipulation of the change he made for the crumpled bills handed him in payment was nothing short of marvelous — Ellen could find no fault with him. The Singer sang in her soul, "At his first low tones young men, young maidens, listening, join hands and lips and are lost in a maze of new longing."

They were married and stole silently away in Jim's wagon, saying not a word to Ellen's mother. From the outset she had objected, shaking her head ominously and refusing to sit on the front porch as long as Jim was there. Ellen would listen to no criticism and offered no confidences; hence when the time came for the wedding and the departure, she left with no explanations.

Southward they travelled, across Michigan and Illinois, stopping at whatever towns struck their fancy, camping by streams, sleeping in farm-houses, in villages, in hotels on the outskirts of cities, seeing what there was to see, enjoying what chance threw their way.

And Ellen was beatifically happy. She saw men busy about many inventions, in Detroit, in Chicago; the comings and goings of lovely, idle women on Cadillac Square, on Michigan Avenue; felt the ebb and surge of life in a hundred small towns. By day she rode at Jim's side; by night she thrilled in his arms. Hardship passed over her unheeded; she was living — her dream had come true. Sometimes she thought of the women at home, slaving for a man who gave nothing in return except food, shelter, clothing; their lives were work, work, work, with no

rest but that in the grave. No, they could offer her nothing; they had nothing to offer.

Winter found them in Tennessee, spring in Ohio, summer in Pennsylvania, and in autumn they turned south again into Virginia. And so they lived, careless of tomorrow and its responsibilities, until five short years had burned themselves out.

It was while they were living in rooms over a grocery just outside of Indianapolis, where they had stopped to buy a new horse — one of theirs having died during the winter — and lay in a new stock, that Ellen discovered the quiver of life beneath her breast. She was wild with delight; the voice of the Singer rose high and clear, "Little children stand spellbound, then thrill in the arms of young mothers."

That night when Jim came in she told him. He smiled at her joy and kissed her palely. After a while he said something about the new horse and went out.

She waited for him all night. A week passed, two, three, and still he did not come. She gave him up for dead and was inconsolable. The grocer and his wife downstairs took pity on her and tried to help, but she would accept nothing. Fortunately Jim had left a trifle of money behind; so she was not destitute. What she had, however, she defended penny by penny against the demands made upon it by absolute necessity. She went into the city to the markets where she bought vegetables no longer fresh for a few cents, and stale bread, and meat that the butchers otherwise would have thrown out. Sometimes, with water drawn from the tap on the landing, she washed her floors until the paint shone like new, scrubbed the woodwork, wiped down the walls in an effort to overcome her loneliness. But nothing prevailed against it and she gave up the struggle, to sit day after day, listless, waiting, waiting, and to lie night after night, sleepless, waiting, waiting, as time blundered on.

The baby was born and she called him Jim, fancying

she saw an exact resemblance to his father. Then, as soon as she was able to travel, she gathered up what few possessions she had accumulated and returned to Felicity.

Her mother had died during her absence, waiting vainly to hear of her welfare, and had left her the old house on Stringtown Pike. Here Ellen took up again the life she had shaken off. The people she had known had changed but little; some were married and lived in the town or on the farms, some had gone away, some few had died. For the most part, however, Felicity was the same.

Her friends gave her work in their houses. She spent long days bending over their washtubs, scorching her face and burning her hands over their cook-stoves. Sometimes hay had to be saved from the rain — she helped save it; meals had to be served to harvesters — she helped serve them. Hardship passed over her unheeded; little Jim must be cared for, and she centered her hope in him.

And he flourished under her care, passing from skirts into tiny trousers, from under foot into the village school. Every year brought him nearer the likeness of his father. He had the same straggly yellow hair, the same close-set eyes, the same talon-like fingers, the same rangy body. And Ellen, seeing him develop so, worshipped him accordingly, thinking him as beautiful as his father had been.

The seasons followed one another and the years piled up, taking their toll of sickness and distress, giving their meed of bounty and well-being. The time came for Jim to be graduated from the high school. He had done well, thanks to Ellen's indefatigable efforts to keep him at his books, and was to deliver the class oration. She came into the hall alone and sat in the last row of seats. Her face was transformed — it had thrown off the lines that torture had etched around her eyes and mouth, and had banished the suffering from her eyes. She sat erect, intent upon the presence of her son, with a look like the Mother of God.

After the program was finished, Jim came to her and kissed her, saying, "It's my turn now, mother; you've done enough." And Ellen thought she had never been so happy in her life; the vision came back more sweetly than ever, "With the wand of his music he touches all sorts and conditions of men, and they awake to live, to feel in their fullness the weavings, the windings of life."

Next day Jim went into Kennedy's Drug Store as assistant, and, as a result, Ellen was enabled to take her life somewhat more easily. She did not entirely give up going out to work, however. As she said herself, "What would I do in that house all day by myself; I'd lose my mind." Instead she went only to help those who had always been her particular friends, women of her own age or older who were beginning to find their duties too arduous. In this way she could occupy herself until Jim came home, adding something to his wages and feeling that she was not wholly a drag upon him.

After a time he became a full-fledged druggist and made pills for the villagers. It was the winter that Ellen's health began to fail, and she found going out to work too hard for her. Pains in her back and legs made nights hideous for her; but she made light of it. Everything that Jim brought her from the store she took and pretended that it helped her. She knew, however, that what she suffered was but natural; exposure, heavy work, years, all had conspired to weaken her — she was an old woman, but she was satisfied: she had Jim. Her days were spent in preparing for Jim's coming at night. She always managed to be busy so that he would not suspect her real condition. Their evenings they spent before the grate-fire, Ellen engaged in endless knitting, Jim in reading endless books.

Sometimes she feared his reading. Glancing at some of the volumes he left lying around the house, she discovered them not to be, as she had thought, books having to do with the making of medicine, but accounts of travel,

stories of foreign countries, novels of life far removed from his own. She became vaguely troubled.

Her worry deepened when, gradually, Jim commenced to spend more and more time away from home. For whole days he would remain out of town. He would tell her of going on trips to Detroit for Charley Kennedy, who was too old to make many of the necessary journeys; again, there were absences for which he offered no explanations. She always noticed that after one of these trips he never read, but sitting by the fire, he would gaze for hours at a time into the flames, so preoccupied, so concentrated upon his thoughts, that not infrequently he had to be spoken to twice before he would hear.

Her impression that he was growing dissatisfied took on firmer outlines one day when she was straightening up his room. In the closet she found a new leather traveling-bag, like nothing she had ever seen. It was of a fine-grain material, black, and mounted with silver. The sight of it stirred to memory her own travels, but more definitely it raised in her mind a terrible regret at her going away without a word to her mother. She loved her mother during the days that followed more intensely than ever before. She sank into a slough of depression, recalling the least detail of their relations. The idea that her going had hurried her mother's death weighed upon her more and more heavily, until, finally, while Jim was away on one of his more prolonged trips and she was left to depend upon her memories for relief from loneliness, the Singer sprang to life in her heart and showed her that her regret was in answer to the ways of the world: "Old men, old women hear, and over them steals understanding of all that life meant in its springtime."

At last there came a morning when, after she had risen and put the coffee-pot on the stove, she went to the foot of the stairs and called Jim, only to remain unheeded. It had never been his habit to sleep through her call; hence she became anxious. Ascending the stairs, she

looked into his room and found it empty, the bed undisturbed. A torturing thought seized her and held her fast. She peered into the closet — the bag was gone and with it all his clothing.

She was stunned and groped blindly for the bed in order to save herself from falling. She lay still, grief wounded to the soul — but not for long. In a moment the Singer leaped into being, singing her steadily back to a grasp upon herself: "Men, heeding, rise to the peaks of endeavor, soar far above prophet, priest, and king, to roam through the halls of David." And she came down and went about her ordinary tasks as if nothing had happened.

With Jim gone, however, there arose the necessity for her to provide entirely for her living. Day after day found her again struggling back and forth from her house to the houses of any who would give her work to do. Again she washed floors on hands and knees, again she scorched her face and burned her hands cooking over hot stoves, again she bent her back over washtubs; but what before had seemed light work was now only soulless toil — the zest was gone; there was no one to work for.

The glow within the thurible was quenched, but still the incense lingered rising in thin wreathes before it faded and was gone.

Her reason for living centered now in the post-office. Every day on her way home she stopped to inquire of old Billy for letters, and every day his answer was the same gentle "Nothing to-day, Ellen."

And so she came through the months until Felicity once more lay impassive in the white fetters of February, and snow upon snow had fallen from an aloof, indifferent sky. After a day filled to the edge with work, Ellen started through the drifts to the post-office, only to find upon reaching it that nothing had come. Then she struggled on to her house, there to eat a meagre mouthful and sink to sleep.

## IV

Dawn broke, the windows brightened, winter had whirled itself a night nearer spring.

Within the old house behind the row of frowning spruces a woman woke, shivered into the kitchen and put the coffee-pot on the stove.

This done, she went to the foot of the stairs and called twice, "Jim, Jim." But there was no answer.

She turned back to the stove. "No matter," she comforted herself, "no matter; perhaps to-day a letter will come." Then she broke an egg in the skillet.

For the name of the Singer is Hope — and his Music, the Leaven of Living.

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EDITORIAL

When this issue of *THE MIDLAND* reaches its readers, the editor will have returned to his home at Glennie. Contributions and other communications intended for the editor should be sent to him at Glennie, Alcona Co., Michigan, until September first, 1922. Business letters should be sent to the publication office at Iowa City, Iowa.

The wilderness has a friendly welcome for him who returns. Hills and fields and woodlands have the familiar sweetness of an old home. The colorful, brush-clad slopes are still hushed by winter. Their quiet is restful, strengthening, making for courage. Earth has healing for bodies and souls of those who love her.

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CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

WALTER J. MULENBERG, now a teacher at Manistee, Michigan, has contributed to earlier volumes of *THE MIDLAND*. He owns a farm adjoining that of the editor of *THE MIDLAND*, at Glennie.

GEORGE CARVER was represented in the January number of *THE MIDLAND*. His stories have appeared in several magazines.

